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Susan Abulhawa. *Against the Loveless World: A Novel*. New York: Simon and Schuster, Inc., 2020.

Reviewed by Fouad Mami.

Against the Loveless World is Susan Abulhawa's third novel. Her *Mornings in Jenin* (2010) and *The Blue Between Sky and Water* (2015) are accelerators toward this work. Here, Abulhawa spells the ABCs of the Palestinian revolution to come. Readers do not encounter the terror-stricken Yousef of the first novel, nor the damaged Nur of the second. One cannot get enough of Nahr ("river" in Arabic) if only because she is a voluptuous dancer. Nahr is not a secondary character as with *Epic of Gilgamesh*. Instead, Nahr stays *le réacteur conceptuel* of the revolution, but she does not attribute any narcissist role to herself. As there exists no script to follow, it is her being that metamorphizes to the essence and that, in turn, organically develops to a concept for the revolution. Nahr embodies in absolute certainty the way a revolution becomes irreversible. Only when the would-be revolutionary dances erotically does life become incendiary.

Readers meet Nahr when she is incarcerated in the cubicle, a high-tech security facility that targets the detainees' knowledge of the absolute. She narrates her exile from its beginning in the pre-1990 Kuwait City, when a large Palestinian community is building Kuwait. Nahr marries Mhammed with presumably unmatched credentials as a revolutionary, which explains why he is a celebrity among Palestinian girls in the city. Because he is gay, Mhammed cannot reconcile with his strict gender expectations and painfully leaves Nahr. As her family's main source of financial support, Nahr takes various odd jobs until she meets Um Buraq in a wedding ceremony. An Iraqi living in Kuwait, Um

Buraq is enchanted with Nahr's dancing and adds her to a team of girls in an underground brothel for rich *khalidji* customers. The night Saddam Hussein invades Kuwait, Nahr and two other girls are entertaining exacting Saudi *emirs* who turn out to be extremely abusive. With the occupation underway, the *emirs* are arrested and later executed, showcasing poetic justice.

With the liberation of Kuwait, Palestinians become overnight *personae non gratae* in a country that they helped build from the sands. Nahr's family find themselves refugees in Amman now. Under the Oslo Accords of 1993, Nahr is finally convinced to visit the West Bank, terminates her divorce papers, and remarries. Mhammed's brother, Bilal, facilitates the daunting procedures and Nahr slowly becomes entangled in Bilal's secret workflow. She discovers that under a surface of docility, underground groups from multiple villages form autonomous resistance cells to Israeli occupation. After earning their trust, Nahr becomes part of Bilal's unit and helps organize several painful blows. In consequence, she must serve an eighteen-years prison sentence. This explains why readers encounter Nahr in the cubicle early in the novel. Exchanged in a deal, readers meet her in closing in Amman. She sees Bilal again but resists the urge to publicly reunite as he is still on the Israelis' wanted list.

The novel's world is far richer than the details of its plot. If Karl Marx's call for communist revolution, his disposition against the state and money, or his historicist approach seem too abstract, Nahr's choices facilitate the reception of such abstractions better than the finest professor in the finest institution. Nahr embodies Marx's *Gattungwesen*, the life of men and women free from alienation. She incarnates the ontological vibration of the primordial tradition predominant before the Neolithic Revolution. Readers discover that the communism of the future can be no other than the way Nahr, Bilal, Samar, Jumana, and Ghassan live, with or without occupation. Before resorting to the armed struggle, they are mentally clear that the revolution is how they need to challenge their society's sedimented gender roles and sanctions of morality. Their anti-statist logic does not waver before either

Israel, Palestinian Authority, Jordan, or Kuwait. Any state, they find, is the codification of alienation. During the short window of time between the Iraqi occupation and American liberation (August 1990-January 1991), Nahr witnesses first-hand how money is commodity fetishism. With inflation escalating like wildfire, people reclaim communism almost in a reboot mode. Even when not articulated as communism, that brief experience undid the ghettoization into Kuwaitis, Iraqis, and Palestinians.

The proof for an underlying revolutionary approach is that Nahr did not have to shy away from her past as a sex worker. Still, not shying away is in no way championing that past. Rather, it is despite that past, perfectly understandable with the logic of undesirable refugees in the Gulf, that she was able to reflect on her condition—a reflection that tolerates the emergence of a radical consciousness actively seeking to reverse the collective misfortune. Her radical logos results from bypassing private misery, refusing to sabotage or coerce one's clarity by zooming in instead on the collective injustice. Sex work is redefined to signify not subscribing one's life force in the reversal of occupation, any occupation. Nahr forces comparisons with both Zoulikha in Assia Djébar's *La femme sans sépulture* (1976) and Hajj Khaled in Ibrahim Nasrallah's *Time of White Horses* (2007). Hatred for opponents fails to motivate these three protagonists. Unsurprisingly, they lack personal enemies. With these three characters, readers note the ancestral breath of the hunter-gatherer. As Nahr admires the curve shaping her breast (reveling in her *Dasein*), readers cannot overlook the parallel of the curve with the hunter's arch. Both subscribe to the same sacral (not sacred) breath. In hitting the prey, the hunter seeks sustenance, not profit. Readers close the novel with the conviction that whoever cannot dance cannot qualify as a revolutionary.

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